Something to kvetch about: Fewer speak Yiddish in South Florida

By Georgia East

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Oy vey.

In multicultural South Florida, where the number of foreign language speakers is rising, those speaking Yiddish is down dramatically in the last decade, according to the most recent census surveys.

Also spoken less often at home is Italian, Hungarian, Polish, Thai and Greek. But their losses are dwarfed by Yiddish, which went from about 16,390 speakers in South Florida in 2000 to about 5,880 in 2010.

"It was not only a language, but part of our cultural heritage," said Gloria "Golda" Shore, 83, who teaches Yiddish to 20 students at Century Village in West Palm Beach. Her group puts on programs which she says bring back memories for many in the audience. "We're a Yiddish mishpocha," she said. "A Jewish family."

South Florida has one of the nation's highest percentages of homes where foreign languages are spoken. In Broward, 38 percent speak a language other than English at home. In Palm Beach County, it's 28 percent and in Miami-Dade, it's a whopping 71 percent. The national average is 20 percent.

While Yiddish is struggling, others are up significantly. They include Urdu (spoken by Pakistanis), Spanish, French Creole, Tagalog (spoken by Filipinos) and Vietnamese.

Demographers say Yiddish, a mix of German and Hebrew, was once widely spoken among Eastern European Jews. However, when many of them immigrated to the U.S. in the early 20th Century, they encouraged their children to speak only English.

Still, some Yiddish words have become part of the English vocabulary, such as klutz (clumsy), schmooze (chat up) and noodge (nag). And those who speak the language here are working hard to keep it alive with classes, conversation groups and music.

"There are so many important documents, books and stories that are in Yiddish. These are treasures that can never disappear," said Al Lipton, 94, who founded the Joy of Yiddish Club, which meets in Aventura, Sunny Isles and hosts events in Hollywood.
Elaine Birnbaum, 84, co-founder of the 17-year-old Shtetl Zingers, a Boca Raton-based group of Yiddish singers and entertainers, performs music with original Yiddish lyrics.

Birnbaum said she learned Yiddish at a young age, when her grandparents in Brooklyn stopped speaking to each other. "I was relaying messages back and forth at the age of three."

When asked about how she felt about the possibility of Yiddish dying in South Florida, Birnbaum responded, "Not on my watch."

Experts say there's a resurgence of the language in some Orthodox Jewish enclaves in the Northeast, where it is widely studied at colleges and universities.

"Yiddish is growing exponentially among the ultra Orthodox," said Marianne Sanua, professor of American Jewish History at Florida Atlantic University. "We don't have a lot of ultra Orthodox homes in South Florida."

But that doesn't stop the Zingers, who comb through Yiddish song books to connect with their audiences.

"We still have people come up to us with tears in their eyes after a show," Birnbaum said.

**Familiar Yiddish words**

Bubbe: grandmother

Chutzpah: nerve, gall

Shlep: to carry or to drag out

Oy vey: "Oh, woe is me."

Nosh: nibble

Glitch: a slip or a minor problem or error

Kvetsh: complain or whine

Mazel Tov: good luck

Michegas: insanity or craziness

Schlock: cheap or inferior

**Source:** The Yiddish Handbook: 40 words you should know

**Biggest gainers**
Some of the languages that gained the most numbers in Broward, Palm Beach and Miami Dade County combined over the last decade.

2000 2010

Spanish 1,623,907 2,091,782
French/French Creole 259,024 310,303
Chinese 14,915 22,731
Vietnamese 5,760 11,494
Tagalog 8,813 13,153
Gujarati 2,163 5,706
Russian 9,098 12,318

**Fewer speakers**

Some of the languages that had the biggest decrease in numbers in Broward, Palm Beach and Miami Dade County combined over the last decade

2000 2010

Yiddish 16,383 5,883
Italian 27,305 20,348
Hungarian 5,321 3,432
Thai 2,145 1,078
Greek 6,390 5,114
Polish 7,759 7,220

Source: Census, American Community Survey